

## THE MISSING PICTURE

By Lorraine Viade, Psy.D.



One of the nominations for best foreign film this year was *The Missing Picture*. The film is based on the book by Rithy Panh entitled *The Elimination*. Set before, during and after the Cambodian takeover by the Khmer Rouge and its notorious leader, Pol Pot, the story of Panh and his family is told using small clay images that serve both to immortalize those who died and as a catharsis to help him deal with the horrors he witnessed. The missing picture is full of metaphors. Waves wash up against shores of pain, suffering, loss, grief and guilt. The figures help cement the memories that helped the inner child survive being separated from family, friends, hope and love.

Salvaged old film is used to show how moving pictures were used to both reveal and conceal truth. The images are both difficult and necessary to watch. The portrayal of reality is so easy to manipulate. Where is the truth? Our truth is what we live through. When people are engulfed by forced conformity that removes every cherished connection to humanity, what is left? Survival can be both bitter and sweet. *The Missing Picture* brings survivor guilt to the surface. Remembering happy times in order to transport the mind and soul away from the harsh reality of imprisonment is effective. But in the end, when all you love is gone, are those memories enough to live for? That is the existential theme of the film. When your culture, beauty, identity and individuality are all taken from you by force, and you are too tired, hungry or despondent to fight back, how do you ever forget? You don't. You can't. Can you ever be happy again? Or, are you left only with the joy you once knew and lost?

This is truly death of the spirit by oppression. The will to survive can never be underestimated, but it comes at a great price. You have to wait to be reunited with those whose tales cannot be told. You have to tell their story, so that your salvation has meaning. When memory and imagination transport you out of horror, endurance may help keep you alive, but will not let you live in peace. Trapped in the reliving and in the identification with the victims makes the trauma ongoing and everlasting. You can talk

about it but you still have to live with it. You might help others, but can you help yourself?

The images in this film are haunting, especially when juxtaposed with the clay figures. A surreal series of memories that serves to capture what happened through the eyes of one person who lived with so many who died so horribly. Survivors are always left to ask, why me? Why my family? There are no answers that will satisfy us. Free will gives human beings the ability to exact both good and evil in the world. That free will flies in the face of every religious belief because when one human chooses to impose their will upon another so that there is no choice left for that person, it falls far beyond the realm of God. Karma also does little to explain the motives of despots and dictators. When one group seeks to dominate another, right and wrong, good and evil do battle, and to the victor goes the spoils.

So then, when all is taken from us, we are left with only the most elemental aspects of humanity. Our emotions, memories, resilience and hope can keep us going but will never replace what was lost. Dreams will always be buried with those who are not here to share them. The ghosts of loved ones who were tortured, buried alive, abused and displaced will always be with those who survive. Survivors can be grateful, they can even be thankful, but will always feel the guilt and responsibility that comes from being left to speak for those whose voices were silenced. *The Missing Picture* is that voice for some of those people who died in the killing fields and whose blood, bones and souls remain to remind us never to forget the ones who are missing in the picture.

I give *The Missing Picture* five empty frames.

